

Health & Wellness Resource Center

Panic attack.

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GENERAL INFORMATION:

What is a **panic attack**?

A **panic attack** is a sudden, strong feeling of fear even though you are not in danger. You also have physical symptoms such as rapid breathing or heavy sweating. Symptoms are usually worst about 10 minutes after they start and can last up to 20 minutes. You may feel like you are having a heart **attack**. You may have a **panic attack** before an event, such as a public speech you have to give. A **panic attack** can also happen for no clear reason. Frequent **panic** attacks may be a sign of a **panic** disorder that needs long-term treatment.

What are the signs and symptoms of a **panic attack**?

- * Chest pain
- * Sweating or trembling
- * Fast or irregular heartbeats
- * Hyperventilation (breathing so quickly you become dizzy, lightheaded, or faint)
- * Shortness of breath, trouble breathing, or a feeling that you are choking or smothering
- * Lightheadedness or fainting
- * Pale or cold skin, chills, or hot flashes
- * Nausea, vomiting, or abdominal pain
- * A feeling that you are separate from your body

What increases my risk for a **panic attack**?

- * A family history of **panic** attacks or anxiety disorders
- * Changes in your life, such as the loss of a loved one or starting a new job
- * Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

- * Social anxiety disorder or a general anxiety disorder
- * Exposure to something you are always afraid of, such as snakes or closed spaces
- * Drug or alcohol use, or withdrawal from drugs or alcohol
- * Certain medicines, such as stimulants, some diabetes medicines, or withdrawal from steroids

How is a **panic attack** diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and when they began. He will ask what triggers your symptoms and if fear of a **panic attack** limits your daily activities. He will also ask about your medical history and if any family members have a similar condition. He may ask about your past and present alcohol or drug use. Tests may be done to check for medical conditions that may be causing your symptoms.

How is a **panic attack** treated?

- * Medicines may be given to make you feel more relaxed or to reduce anxiety that causes a **panic attack**. Some medicines are taken only when you are having a **panic attack**. Other medicines can be taken to prevent **panic** attacks.
- * A behavior therapist can help you learn to control how your body responds to stressful situations. He may also teach you ways to relax your muscles and slow your breathing during a **panic attack**. He may teach you ways to assure yourself that the **panic attack** will not get worse. You may also learn ways to prevent or stop hyperventilation.
- * Exposure therapy is used to help you change your reaction to triggers. You are exposed to your **panic attack** triggers in small amounts. The amount of exposure is slowly increased until it no longer triggers a **panic attack**.

What can I do to manage or prevent a **panic attack**?

- * Manage stress. Stress can trigger a **panic attack**. Yoga and meditation are good ways to help manage stress. It might be helpful to talk to someone about the stress in your life.
- * Exercise as directed. Exercise can reduce stress and help you sleep better. Your healthcare provider can help you create an exercise plan.
- * Set a sleep schedule. Too little sleep can increase anxiety. Go to bed at the same time each night and wake up at the same time each morning. Keep your room quiet and free from distractions, such as a television or computer.
- * Limit alcohol and caffeine. Alcohol and caffeine can both increase anxiety and make it difficult for you to sleep well. A drink of alcohol is 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1 1/2 ounces of liquor.
- * Eat a variety of healthy foods. Healthy foods include fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy products, lean meats, fish, and beans. Limit sugar. Sugar can increase your symptoms.
- * Do not smoke. Nicotine can make you jittery and make it more difficult to relax. Smoking can also increase breathing problems. Ask your healthcare provider for information if you currently smoke and need help quitting.

When should I seek immediate care?

* You have severe chest pain, shortness of breath, or irregular heartbeats.

* You have thoughts of harming yourself or another person.

When should I contact my healthcare provider?

* You have new or worsening **panic** attacks after treatment.

* You have questions or concerns about your condition or care.

CARE AGREEMENT:

You have the right to help plan your care. Learn about your health condition and how it may be treated. Discuss treatment options with your caregivers to decide what care you want to receive. You always have the right to refuse treatment.

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